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# The Abyss of Abundance: Consumer Overconsumption and the Road to Environmental Collapse

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**Abstract**

The pattern of consumer overconsumption, fueled by relentless economic growth and the internal desire for material goods, has emerged as a prominent driver of environmental degradation, pushing our planet to collapse. This paper examines the cause-and-effect relationships between consumer behavior and its catastrophic environmental implications. By unraveling the root causes of overconsumption and its detrimental effects, this study attempts to underscore the urgency of immediate action to prevent irreversible environmental collapse. Chapter 1 will discuss the problem of consumer overconsumption, including an analysis of the detrimental environmental effects of our current consumption levels to highlight why the issue of consumer overconsumption needs to be addressed. Chapter 2 will explore the psychology of human behavior, namely, the mechanisms that cause us to purchase the way we do, explicitly highlighting the role of social media and marketing in driving consumer consumption patterns. Chapter 3 will examine obstacles within the current sustainable business movement in The United States, unpacking the privilege of sustainable living through issues of class and deceptive marketing practices in place, capitalizing on individuals' willingness to pay for environmentally focused products. The fourth chapter will implement environmental politics to analyze what various political players, including the government, environmental organizations, sustainable business organizations, and consumers, are doing about the problems outlined in the previous two chapters. Finally, Chapter 5 will probe what I believe is necessary to solve the issue of consumer overconsumption, including strong legislation for encouraging sustainable production and consumption, a circular economy system, implementing environmental regulations, taxes, subsidies, or incentives, and environmental education regarding the consequences of overconsumption. Urgent and collaborative efforts from the business industry, the government,

and the everyday consumer are necessary to curb overconsumption and ensure our planet's preservation for many generations.

Table of Contents

**Introduction: Consuming Our Future**

Growing up, my family lived in a suburban neighborhood in Texas, resembling any other stereotypical middle-class neighborhood in America. Each year, as Christmas approached, my street would turn into a makeshift winter wonderland, attempting to disguise the fact that the South never rose above 60 degrees around the holidays. Neighbors would string up festive lights of various colors, hanging them from their roofs to illuminate the streets all night long. Inflatable blow-ups scattered the yards, pumping air into giant Santa and elf displays all throughout December. This tradition became a friendly neighborhood rivalry, one that I looked forward to every year as a way to comfort me through the dark winters with trees barren of leaves. Though I cherished this tradition, I slowly noticed the decorations growing in excess as the years passed. Where one of my neighbors infamously had a rainbow light display, the following year, they showcased white, glacier-like icicle lights hanging from their rooftop, the rainbow light fixture nowhere to be seen. The subtle candy cane exhibits slowly turned into illuminated reindeer scenes on rooftops, seemingly becoming more extravagant as the years passed. As the holidays passed with glowing displays of abundance, the overconsumption suddenly became staggering. Light shows were left running throughout the night, and the sheer volume of unnecessary decorations grew to overpower the intended spirit of the holidays themselves. One year, it occurred to me that my neighborhood was contributing to an unsustainable cycle of overconsumption. The desire to outshine others grew to overshadow the true meaning of the holidays, leaving me to reflect on how integrated overconsumption was in all areas of our lives, often to the detriment of the environment.

In a period marked by relentless growth, consumer culture has undoubtedly grown to reflect the age of abundance. As our appetite for material goods grows, so do the shadows of

environmental degradation and climate collapse. This thesis explores the intricate relationship between rising levels of consumer overconsumption and the impending environmental collapse. Our current economic system thrives on relentless expansion, compelling us to purchase and disregard goods at an alarming rate. As consumption rates continue to rise, finite natural resources are exploited, unmanageable amounts of waste are produced, and our natural ecosystems are pushed to the brink of collapse. The consequences of our insatiable desire for material goods are becoming increasingly more apparent: climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and the end of our environmental system as we know it. To avoid the impending environmental collapse that is on path to occur, it becomes necessary to analyze the systems driving consumer behavior and the complex issues rooted within sustainable production and consumption. In the chapters that follow, Chapter One will provide quantitative data reflecting consumer overconsumption and its impact on our natural systems. Chapters Two through Four will explore the psychological, historical, and political aspects of consumer consumption patterns. Lastly, in the final chapter, I will broach a number of policy recommendations to encourage the sustainable production and consumption of goods through implementing a circular economic system, environmental regulations and incentives, and widespread environmental education.

**Chapter 1. Unearthing the Consequences**

In the contemporary world, overconsumption has become a critical issue with significant implications for individuals and the physical environment. This chapter aims to analyze what overconsumption is and discuss the multifaceted nature of overconsumption using a data-driven analysis, emphasizing the substantial effect of overconsumption on environmental collapse. As

we navigate an era marked by ecological challenges, it is imperative to understand the quantifiable dimensions of overconsumption. This chapter makes a compelling case for overconsumption's contribution to environmental degradation and why it demands our collective attention and engagement.

*An Overview of Overconsumption.* Overconsumption is a term often used when discussing and criticizing levels of of consumption that have become normalized within our society. The term "Overconsumption" is used in various fields, including medicine, nutrition, psychology, marketing, nutrition, sociology, ecology, economics, and more (Håkansson, A. 2014). The European Environment Information and Observation Network defines overconsumption as "the excessive consumption or the excess use of goods and services, including energy, land, water, or materials, that cause harm or detrimental effects to humans and/or the environment, namely by exceeding the carrying capacity and life-supporting systems of the planet and its ecosystems" (European Environment Information and Observation Network 2021). While individual levels may seem inconsequential, collectively, our consumerism plays a significant role in accelerating climate change. Nearly every act involved in the production and consumption cycles contributes to the acceleration of climate change.

Climate change refers to the process of significant environmental changes, such as rising global temperatures, rising precipitation levels, wind patterns, or other measures of climate that occur over several decades or longer (The United Nations, 2023). The United Nations notes that although such changes to our global environment can occur naturally due to catastrophic events such as a large volcanic eruption, human activity is the primary driver of adverse changes to our climate. Deforestation, toxic pollution, climate change, and species extinction are just a few of the problems tied to our current consumption of goods globally. When it comes to sectors of

environmental collapse, focusing on reducing individual consumption becomes more crucial than controlling population numbers (The United Nations, 2023). The UN's Panel of Experts on International Resources underscores that our present consumption rate surpasses the planet's regenerative capacity by 1.7 times; this is evidenced by an annual mass of apparel reaching fifty million tons and a 60% surge in garments purchased per person over two decades, even though the lifespan of these pieces has been cut in half (The United Nations, 2007 & George Washington University, 2018). In The United States, people now collectively spend more than $250 billion each year on digital gadgets, $140 billion on personal care products, $75 billion on jewelry and watches, $60 billion on household appliances, and $30 billion on luggage (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The annual garbage output in The United States and Canada, loaded into trucks, could circle the equator twelve times. (Environment America, 2021). The trajectory of our consumption patterns indicates a worrisome trend. With current habits, we are projected to exceed 200 billion tons of material goods annually by the mid-century, four times over the ecological boundary (The United Nations, 2021). Despite only doubling the global population from 1960 to 2000, private consumption expenditures have quadrupled. Our future currently projects an even higher per capita consumption rate as developing nations seek to emulate the consumption patterns of developed nations, which currently account for 60% of our planet's total private consumption expenditures despite comprising less than 12% of the global population (Dauvergne, 2010).

Mitigating the impact of rising consumption is one of the twenty-first century's biggest challenges. Annual increases in the consumption of clothing, electronics, personal care products, and non-essential items severely contribute to material waste, greenhouse gas emissions, energy use, and ecosystem collapse. Recognizing the patterns of environmental degradation linked to

consumer behavior is crucial. We must reassess our relentless pursuit of growth and understand the drivers compelling consumers to exceed our essential needs. Before irreversible consequences occur, it is crucial to comprehend the extent to which our consumption impacts the global environment, why it happens, and what measures are necessary to reverse the damage inflicted on our environmental systems.

*Overconsumption and Ecosystem Services.* Understanding the profound impact of human actions on environmental degradation requires us to grasp how our lives depend on the natural world. While it's impossible to quantify every benefit nature provides us, we are able to observe many tangible benefits of living on a planet with healthy, functioning ecosystems. This concept is known as ecosystem services, a term defined as "the benefits people obtain from ecosystems, including provisioning services, regulation services, cultural services, and supporting services" (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005).

Ecosystem services reflect humans' benefits from the natural environment, emphasizing four main satisfaction categories. A provisioning service refers to any type of benefit a person can extract directly from nature, along with food, other provisioning services include water, timber, natural gas, oil, material for clothing, and medical benefits (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Regulating services emulate benefits provided by ecosystems that moderate natural phenomena; regulating services include pollination, decomposition, erosion and flood control, carbon storage, and climate regulation (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Cultural services reflect any non-material benefits that our physical environment contributes to the development and cultural advancement of humans, including how ecosystems play a role in local, national, or global cultures, the building of knowledge and the spread of ideas, creative interactions with nature including art, music, and architecture, and recreation (Millenium

Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Finally, supporting services refer to all ecosystem services necessary for the production of other ecosystems, such as processes of photosynthesis, nutrient cycling, the water cycle, and the formation of soils (Millenium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Supporting services allow the Earth to sustain basic life forms, human life, and whole ecosystems. Without the roles supporting services maintain, ecosystem services and life on earth as a whole would be impossible.

*Overconsumption Causes and Effects.* It is crucial to recognize that the repercussions of overconsumption echo throughout all aspects of our natural environment, a force that works to sustain our very existence. Namely, regarding provisionary services, patterns of overconsumption lead to increases in production levels as brands and corporations attempt to match consumer demand with adequate supply levels. As production levels continue to rise, over-extraction of water is reflected as water is a primary resource needed for manufacturing goods. Nationally, industrial water use accounts for 15.9 billion gallons of daily water withdrawals, accounting for nearly 4% of total water usage (National Association of Water Companies, 2017). Although four percent of the world's total water usage might seem insignificant at first glance, it is essential to understand that less than one percent of Earth's water sources are accessible for human use. The majority of the water on Earth is either saltwater in oceans, freshwater locked in icecaps, or too difficult to access for practical purposes (Mishra, 2023). Water is a precious resource that nearly 663 million people cannot access. As we divert more water away from aquatic environments to supplement production needs, many plant and animal species become threatened and endangered (National Association of Water Companies, 2017). At the current consumption rate, this situation will only get worse. The World Wildlife

Foundation estimates that by 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will face water scarcity, collapsing global ecosystems (World Wildlife Foundation, 2023).

Overconsumption not only worsens water scarcity but also drives biodiversity loss. The increased demand for consumer goods goes hand in hand with higher energy consumption and the depletion of natural resources worldwide—the heightened extraction of Earth's finite resources results in profound alterations to natural habitats, known as habitat conversion (Hens et al., 2003). Every ton of material that is extracted from the earth comes with an impact on our planet's living systems. "Ramping up the extraction of biomass means razing forests and draining wetlands; it means destroying habitats and carbon sinks; it means soil depletion, ocean dead zones, and overfishing" (Hickle, 2020). According to The United Nations, material extract alone is responsible for 80% of the total biodiversity loss (Hickle, 2020). The rate at which we are utilizing Earth's raw materials surpasses their ability to replenish themselves within our lifetime. Consider the fishing industry as an illustration of this issue. Despite fish being a renewable resource, overexploitation has resulted in over 34% of fish populations being overfished (University of Washington, 2023). The overexploitation of fish stock over the last 40 years is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. *Overexploitation of Fish Stock between 1974-2017.*
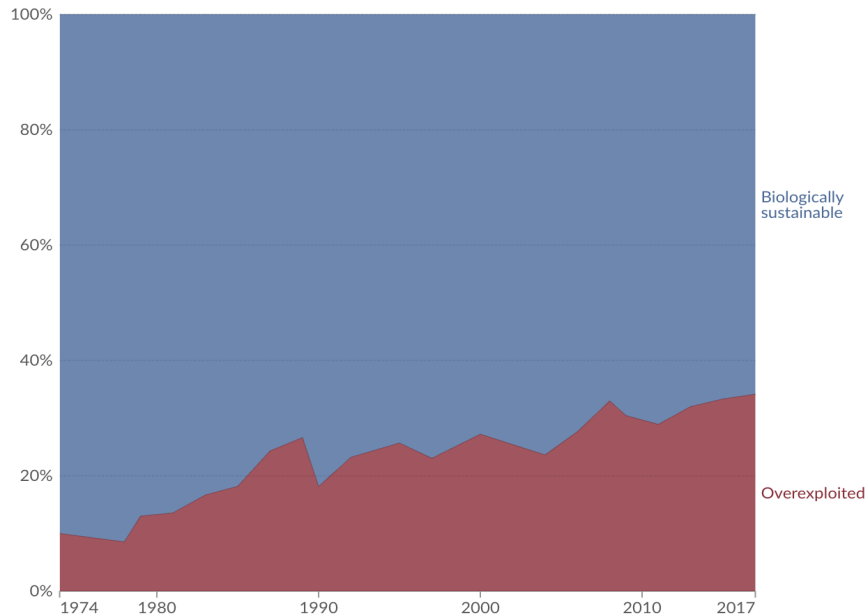


Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations – processed by Our World in Data. "Biologically sustainable" [dataset]. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [original data].

Furthermore, with nearly one-third of fish populations facing overexploitation, marine ecosystems suffer severe consequences. Decades of detrimental fishing practices have caused a significant decline in vital fish stocks like Bluefin Tuna and Grand Banks Cod, while collateral damage affects numerous other marine species due to overfishing. Thousands of marine mammals and sea turtles are captured annually, alongside millions of sharks. Although some of these species are endangered and protected by national laws, many others, including the Eastern Pacific Leatherback Turtle and Maui dolphin, are on the brink of extinction (World Wildlife Fund, 2019). Overfishing, driven by excessive overconsumption, alters various marine species' sizes, reproduction patterns, and maturation rates. When too many fish are removed from the ocean, it creates an imbalance, potentially eroding the food web. This imbalance can result in the depletion of valuable marine species, including vulnerable populations like sea turtles and corals

(World Wildlife Fund, 2019). Despite our efforts to separate ourselves from nature, we are part of an ecosystem that relies on the functioning of plants and animals. When our ecosystems collapse, we collapse with them.

Moreover, consumer overconsumption exacerbates climate change, resulting in heightened and unpredictable rainfall patterns due to warmer atmospheric temperatures (Mitchell et al., 2006). Consequently, there is increased nutrient runoff from agricultural and urban areas (Environmental Protection Agency, 2023). The excess in nutrient runoff disrupts our planet's natural nutrient cycle, leading to imbalances in our Earth's supporting services, including freshwater systems, and, in extreme cases, excess algae growth and, eventually, eutrophication (Environmental Protection Agency, 2023). The collapse of freshwater ecosystems would result in the depletion of entire habitats and species, completely disrupting the natural food chain system and leading to the extinction of hundreds of species.

Next, as it is demonstrated that overconsumption can lead to habitat destruction and biodiversity loss, it is essential to recognize that these scenarios also disrupt our planet's regulating services. As discussed in the previous section, according to the National Resources Defence Council, "It is increasingly clear that climate change has detectably influenced several weather-related variabilities that contribute to floods… our warming world exacerbates many of the systems that prevent flooding" (National Resource Defense Council, 2019). As more of our natural ecosystems diminish, the protection against natural disasters such as flooding will disappear. A warmer atmosphere subsequently holds and eventually dumps more water. A study from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration examined record-breaking landfall in Louisiana in 2016, resulting in devastating floods. These rains were at least 40% more likely and 10% more intense due to reduced natural disaster relief (National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration, 2019). Likewise, as deforested watersheds are inadequately able to filter water and regulate the water supply, erosion, flooding, and landslide risks increase without the support of forests to hold sediment in place and trees to soak up excess precipitation.

Next, habitat destruction and biodiversity loss have the potential to reduce the cultural value of certain environments for humans significantly. Take the coast of Australia, for example. As relentless consumer demand for growth has contributed to rising sea temperatures, miles of Australia's precious reef ecosystems die from ocean acidification and coral bleaching. "It is virtually certain that the upper ocean, where many coral reef ecosystems lie, has warmed between 1971 and 2010. These changes are consistent with those expected from the associated rise in greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere" (Hoegh-Guldberg et al., 2017.) As greenhouse gas emissions increase in the atmosphere, global temperatures rise, resulting in rising ocean temperatures. When coral reef systems endure heat stress, they release microscopic algae that live dormant in the tissues of coral reefs, revealing a white skeleton frequently referred to as coral bleaching. Although bleached corals are not dead, they are at a higher risk of starvation and disease. Marine heatwaves have contributed to four mass coral bleaching events on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the largest reef ecosystem in the world, reducing shallow water coral reefs by nearly 50% (Great Barrier Reef Foundation, 2024.)

Furthermore, the increased release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere leads to its absorption by oceans, causing a rise in ocean acidity, a process known as ocean acidification. Since the late 18th century, the ocean has absorbed approximately 30% of the carbon emissions generated by humans. Thus, increased ocean acidity renders the ability of corals to construct skeletons and form coral reefs, a critical process that creates habitats for numerous marine species and serves as a protective barrier for coastlines against destructive storms (Great Barrier

Reef Foundation, 2024.) Without urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, The Great Barrier Reef will continue to degrade, with continuous consequences for its cultural and heritage values.

The rise in greenhouse gas emissions and global temperatures demonstrates a loss of biodiversity and a growing disconnect from nature. Extensive evidence demonstrates that viewing, interacting with, and living in natural environments lead to reduced stress, increased patience, increased self-discipline, increased attention capacity, and recovery from mental fatigue or crisis and psychophysiological imbalance (Russell et al., 2013.)  Furthermore, losses or degradation of ecosystems or natural objects can negatively impact components of well-being (Russell et al., 2013). Likewise, everyday exposure to natural elements is strongly linked to increased mental health. Homes surrounded by greenspaces or functions of the natural environment have been associated with an increased ability of residents to cope with personally defined major issues. Deep interconnections are demonstrated by mental well-being and living in close relationships with plants and animals (Russell et al., 2013.)

Additionally, a social science methodology was employed to identify the non-material value of The Great Barrier Reef for individuals. This approach evaluated the reef's significance in enhancing lifestyle, promoting well-being, and embodying aesthetic, scientific, and biodiversity values. The comprehensive study engaged 8,3000 participants across multiple cultural groups. It was discovered that people across all groups related strongly to each of the cultural values provided by the reef, highlighting the importance of non-material benefits that individuals derive from iconic ecosystems such as The Great Barrier Reef (Pendleton et al., 2019.) Many people feel a sense of connectedness to the natural world that diminishes yearly due to human activity.

Lastly, it is necessary to recognize the economic stability and security that biodiversity provides. A recent study by Deloitte aimed to include both the social and brand value of The Great Barrier Reef to Australia's economy. The study found the total value of the reef to be AU $56 Billion, owing the high number to the reefs' vast biodiversity and assets related to commercial and recreational fisheries, shoreline protection, reef-related tourism, and recreation, which additionally work to provide nearly 65,000 jobs in Australia (Pendleton et al., 2019). Biodiversity is essential for enhancing individuals' well-being and is pivotal in boosting the economy's overall health. Carelessness towards overconsumption will result in economic collapse.

It becomes clear that severe consequences of consumer overconsumption need to be addressed. To avoid irreversible damage to our natural systems, conservative consumer purchasing patterns and a rapid system of degrowth are necessary implementations. Normalizing pro-environmental consumption behaviors such as minimizing consumption, re-pairing rather than re-purchasing, avoiding impulse and unnecessary purchases, green-buying, and purchasing goods designed to limit environmental impact are the first steps in decreasing consumption to increase environmental life expectancy. But what barriers come with adopting these principles?

**Chapter 2. The Mind's Marketplace**

In an era of rapid globalization leading to increased environmental concerns, overconsumption is a critical issue deeply rooted in consumer culture. This chapter will analyze the intersections of environmental psychology and consumer behavior, working to shed light on the underlying psychological factors that drive consumption patterns. Environmental psychology, a subsection of psychology, focuses on individuals' interactions with their physical environment

(American Psychological Association, 2014).  I will specifically discuss psychology's role in consumer behavior through feelings of insecurity and the use of social media. Additionally, I will examine the marketing industry's role in capitalizing off insecurities and increasing consumption levels. By exploring psychological processes and social influences, this chapter aims to unravel the complex phenomena of consumer culture, offering insights as to why consumers often find themselves tangled in a web of overconsumption. Through an environmental psychology lens, I aim to unravel the relationship between consumer behavior and the environment that results in the unsustainable patterns of consumption shaping society today.

*Unraveling Insecurity*.  Feelings of insecurity are a leading cause of heightened individual consumption patterns. When individuals feel uncertain about their identity, they frequently attempt to boost their self-assurance through consumption. Buying trending goods or items emblematic of a specific persona or image aids individuals in feeling more accepted among their peers, thereby elevating self-esteem. Research shows that heightened insecurity correlates with increased shopping tendencies as consumers are motivated to engage in consumption behaviors that refine their self-perception and enhance their self-image (Consiglio et al., 2022). Additionally, the sense of low self-esteem is a precursor for increased consumption levels, given evidence suggesting a strong correlation between low perceptions of self-worth and consumption patterns (Oh, 2021). For example, an individual feeling insecure in their body image might purchase clothing to compensate for perceived inadequacies, believing that clothing viewed as slimming or trendy will make them feel more attractive or be viewed as more socially accepted.

Insecurities might drive an individual to conform to prevailing fashion or social norms, as people commonly purchase clothing they believe will help them fit in with a particular social group to avoid social scrutiny. Those who are unsure of their identity might engage in

consumption as a form of experimentation, as purchasing and showing off trending items can be a way for many to gain approval from others, alleviating their insecurities. Furthermore, low self-esteem may trigger impulse buying as a coping mechanism, as instant gratification from a new purchase may temporarily relieve negative feelings about oneself (Sierra, 2023). As social beings, we are genetically predisposed to align ourselves with others, a tendency illustrated through buying into the latest trends. Individuals often feel swayed by social norms, peer pressure, or a desire for social acceptance through the items they purchase; however, this pattern only encourages a constant consumption cycle to further cement one's place in a social environment (Sierra, 2023). Consumer consumption levels are a social phenomenon; those around them directly influence how people think and feel about products.

Furthermore, research in experimental psychology suggests that incidental life situations can profoundly influence consumer decision-making. People often experience daily setbacks, such as being rejected from a job, getting laid off, or financial investment losses (Sierra, 2023). Experiences that undermine the satisfaction of psychological needs can cause individuals to orient towards materialism as a compensatory strategy intended to revoke the distressing effects of feelings of insecurity (Kasser et al., 2003). Materialistic Value Orientation (MVO) involves the individual belief that there is importance in pursuing culturally sanctioned goals of life, such as attaining financial success, having nice possessions, portraying the right image (produced, in part, through consumer goods), and obtaining a high status (Kasser et al., 2003). Individuals with a strong MVO are mainly concerned with social comparisons and the opinions of others, often leading them to feel bad about themselves. In situations threatening self-power, intelligence, and belongingness, individuals frequently turn to shopping, as the anticipation of purchasing new items triggers a surge in dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with reward and pleasure

(Kasser et al., 2003). The euphoria experienced during a shopping spree can disrupt sadness from life's hardships, leaving individuals inclined to shop, hoping for a dopamine rush amidst their insecurity.

Similarly, multiple studies indicate that possessing strong materialistic values and indulging in excessive consumption can have adverse effects on mental health. Research as far back as the 1800s has found a link between overconsumption and poor mental well-being. As stated by Lee and Ahn in their research, indulging in excessive consumption has a detrimental impact on overall well-being. Yet, paradoxically, individuals in developed nations still consider that the primary source of happiness is the accumulation of material goods (Soares et al., 2023). Likewise, as indicated by social scientists, those who prioritize the possession of material goods often experience diminished life satisfaction and lower levels of happiness. Placing a high value on materialism takes away from what are commonly considered the fundamental sources of happiness, such as meaningful relationships and quality time spent with family and friends, leading many individuals with strong materialistic values to have goal orientations that lead to poorer well-being (Soares et al., 2023).

Additionally, Tim Kasser, an acclaimed psychologist recognized for his work on materialism and well-being, noted in his book, *The High Price of Materialism,* that prioritizing extrinsic goals, such as acquiring life possessions, leads to heightened feelings of discontent within relationships, diminished mood, and an increase in psychological problems (Soares et al., 2023). Kasser observed a strong correlation between an excessively materialistic mindset and elevated levels of anxiety and depression. Notably, individuals exhibiting such tendencies reported lower happiness and life satisfaction levels. Furthermore, it was observed that these individuals frequently lacked empathy and were perceived as manipulative and competitive

towards people in their lives (Soares et al., 2023). Likewise, in a longitudinal study investigating the impact of materialism on adolescent well-being, Cohen and Cohen uncovered a concerning association between adolescents' admiration for material possessions and various psychological disorders, including attention deficit disorder (ADD), conduct disorder, and narcissism (Soares et al., 2023). The study emphasizes the detrimental effects of Oniomania (compulsive buying disorder), which frequently leads to the irrational contraction of debt, in addition to occupational, interpersonal, marriage, social, and spiritual distress (Soares et al., 2023).

It is imperative to acknowledge the psychological consequences of overconsumption, which can include anxiety, stress, and various other mental disorders. The overwhelming abundance of choices coupled with the relentless pressure to keep up with the latest trends and constantly upgrade possessions can enable feelings of unease and indecisiveness. These patterns of overconsumption significantly affect individuals' mental well-being and worsen feelings of inadequacy. Such patterns of overconsumption create a harmful cycle where consumption, as a way to seek satisfaction, only intensifies dissatisfaction, prompting consumers to repeat the process oncemore. Insecurity stemming from self-esteem concerns, the desire for belonging, and crises of identity lead individuals to utilize consumption as a form of validation. Although consumption can provide short-term relief, consumers often find themselves tangled in a web of unnecessary consumption, as the dopamine of a retail purchase only lasts so long. Relying on the consumption of goods to combat feelings of insecurity is not only unsustainable in maintaining personal well-being but for our physical environment as well.

*Consumerism in the Digital Age.* From the early days of the internet to today's social media platforms, digital media has evolved into a powerful tool to connect individuals and shape individual consumption behavior. The impact of social media on consumer behavior defines how

consumers purchase goods through the role of influencers, peer recommendations, and tailored media marketing strategies. Due to the increased digitalization of our current environment, the challenge of remaining within Earth's planetary boundaries while meeting consumer needs is faced in a rapidly changing context. The digital sphere continues to penetrate most daily activities, a trend posing risks to sustainable consumption within planetary boundaries (Börjesson Rivera et al., 2014.)

Worldwide, on average, social media users spend two and a half hours online daily (Statista, 2023.) Exposure to digital media may facilitate unsustainable consumption as more versatile forms of digital media are created, increasing information access while providing consumers with additional ways to consume goods. The internet's inherent connectivity and networks allow peer-to-peer interaction for users; authorizing conversation in online forums or social media platforms potentially influences users' attitudes toward consumption (Bandura, 2002; Frick & Matthies, 2020; Midden et al., 2007.) A key component of social media is the ability for customers to evaluate products, make recommendations to contacts or friends, and link current purchases through platforms such as X or Instagram. Social media encompasses a wide range of word-of-mouth forums, including blogs, discussion boards, emails, customer product or service ratings, and more. Through these platforms, consumers often express opinions of brands and products with large groups, leading social media communication technologies to create a new profile of consumers and consumer behavior patterns (Ozer, 2012.)

Furthermore, where customers once relied on retail outlets and employee experts in each department, today's consumers now rely on recommendations from friends or acquaintances on social media. Social media is a precious tool for firms, as satisfied users can now recommend a product they purchased to other users, allowing the recommendation to appear on the feeds of

those whose interests most closely align with the product's benefits (Ozer, 2012.)  Studies show that consumers easily engage with social network sites in their buying decision processes and frequently acquire secondary information about products from external sources before making a purchase decision (Chu et al., 2011.)

Additionally, social media users in 2011 reported high levels of influence as follows: 23.1 million people discovered new brands or products through social media, up 22% from 2010; 22.5 million people reported using social media to learn about unfamiliar brands or products, up 9% from 2010; 17.8 million people reported feeling "strongly influenced" in their purchasing decisions by opinions on social media, up 19% from 2010 and 15.1 million people emphasized they refer to social media before making a purchase decision, up 29% from 2010, implying a strong link between social media usage, and patterns of consumer behavior (Chu et al., 2011.) Moreover, studies show a strong correlation between increased social media usage and individual consumption of conspicuous products. Conspicuous products can be defined as luxury, high-end, or expensive goods, representing purchasing goods on a "want basis," not a "need basis" (Chu et al., 2011.) Conspicuous goods are often purchased to reflect a specific social status or class, working to eliminate insecurities in one's perception, as mentioned in Section 2a. Social media users' buying motivation frequently increases due to exposure to product recommendations through electronic word-of-mouth. The more time a person spends on social media, the more likely they are to make indulgent purchases, including conspicuous products, to alleviate insecurities (Wilcox et al., 2013.)

Similarly, high levels of social media usage increase impulse purchases as e-commerce can undermine customer purchase restraints through high-engagement features and enhanced product stimuli, including loyalty programs and chat rooms designed to steer consumers towards

impulse purchases. When customers show increased engagement in social media, they are more responsive to brand advertisements, as engaged users frequently compare themselves to those creating content within the media platforms (Wang and Wallendorf, 2006.) Users who invest more time and show interest in idealized perceptions of the self on social media are more likely to be exposed to texts, comments, tweets, and product reviews from influencers or other users. These high levels of exposure can push social media users to gain social proof, believing that the greater the number of people who find an idea or a product interesting, the more likely it is to be true. Heavily engaged social media users tend to make purchases more driven by emotions and what other users post or do rather than rational purchasing decisions (Wang and Wallendorf, 2006.)

Lastly, social media addiction is positively correlated to online compulsive buying, as customers with strong materialistic impulses frequently use goods such as clothing to control impressions of themselves, placing trendy items in a central role of their lives in an attempt to communicate a sense of success to others (O'Cass and Frost, 2022.) Studies show that psychological motivations such as envy and social comparison significantly enhance users' online conspicuous consumption as materialistic individuals buy goods due to the positive sensations they provide, indicating that materialism is a technique used to minimize the adverse effects of negative self-perceptions.

*Marketing and The Culture of Overconsumption.* Overconsumption has begun to collect increasing attention due to social, economic, and environmental implications. Marketing, a key driver in consumer behavior, has played a vital role in increased overconsumption patterns, accelerating the speed of climate collapse. Though marketing plays a crucial role in businesses' communicating with consumers and driving demand for products, it can quickly become harmful

through the excessive and often unsustainable patterns of production the marketing industry promotes. It is emphasized by American Business Theorirists Tushman and Romanelli that "any meaningful social movement towards sustainability would require widespread questioning of generally accepted marketing practices which, in turn, would require broad acknowledgment of significant crisis" (Martin et al., 2014.) Through acknowledging the environmental crisis, the business industry and the crisis of unsustainable production and consumption have been acknowledged. When considering how the business industry contributes to environmental degradation, *The Journal of Macromarketing* begs the question of whether sustainability is a megatrend. However, rather than sustainability being a megatrend, it is apparent that the opposite is true; environmental degradation, freshwater depletion, and global warming are the megatrends (Martin et al., 2014.)

A primary concern regarding sustainability as a possible megatrend is the close identification of materialism with consumerism, which is presumed to be endemic to industrialized societies. If our modern society is over-materialistic to the point of its detriment, then marketing in the service of corporate power owns much of the blame for it (Martin et al., 2014.) Additionally, Martin et al. highlight the idea that marketing promotes the idea of "magical thinking," a concept that can be described as "the enchantment of magical goods" (Martin et al., 2014.) Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, scholars of marketing and consumer desire, emphasize that "consumer imaginations of and cravings for consumer goods that are not yet owned can mesmerize and seem to promise magical meaning in life. Among the 'sorcerers' helping to enchant these goods are advertisers, retailers, peddlers, and other merchants of mystique" (Belk et al., 2003.) Furthermore, Belk highlights that marketing and advertising relentlessly promote the ideology of "the good life," attempting to highlight that an ideal life can be achieved through

the consumption of more goods. Belk's beliefs further emphasize the overall objectives of the marketing industry (to create consumer awareness that previously unrecognized needs exist), which I will touch on later in the chapter.

It should be noted that "marketing seems to provide detailed instructions on how to live the good life. The problem is, the good life is a mythical construct where mundane products and brands promise material resolutions to unresolvable paradoxes" (Holt, 2004.) Consumer behavior and attitudes thus far have been the focus of sustainability research in marketing, but asking consumers to change their purchasing behaviors in the face of marketing communications and infrastructures supported by the dominant social paradigm of consumption is asking them to "view the invisible" and "move the immovable" (Holt, 2004.) In a world where overconsumption is constantly being pushed, how do we decide what we want, and even what we desperately want, when we don't *need* anything more?

James Brusseau, a philosopher of ethics, highlights the role of advertisements in the concept of artificial need creation. For example, Brusseau specifically references the Old Spice body wash advertisements. He points out that while it might be difficult to understand how Old Spice represents an improvement over traditional, old-fashioned soaps, the brand succeeded in creating a consumer aspiration to smell "like a successful man" through its marketing campaign, which results in consumers believing they need to purchase the product. An Old Spice thirty-second reel made its advertisement debut for the first time during The Super Bowl, herding many men to the idea that they needed to purchase Old Spice body wash specifically. Although the soap male viewers used when watching the advertisement inherently had nothing wrong with it, viewers believed their current soap was no longer functional. Through this, consumers were drawn to disregard their current body soap, believing Old Spice would better satisfy their needs

(Bruusea, 2013.) Brusseau emphasizes that corporations producing goods and "selling them through the use of slick advertising campaigns" are not satisfying consumer needs but are working to change who consumers are by persuading them to believe that they need new products (Bruuseau, 2013.) Instead of fabricating products customers already want, corporations' marketing strategies now work to fabricate consumers into desiring their products, a concept known as artificial need creation.

Another argument against the concept of artificial need creation through the use of advertising is the utilitarian worry that consumers are being converted into chronically unhappy people who have no way to satisfy their desires permanently. Brusseau highlights that "if you work to attain something you've been told you're supposed to want, and the second you get it, some new company enters with the news that there is now something else you need, the emotional condition of not being satisfied threatens to become permanent. Like mice trapped on a running wheel, consumers chase after durable satisfaction they can never reach" (Brusseau, 2013.) Marketing's fabrication of artificial needs encourages overconsumption as consumers constantly believe purchasing their next good will finally make them happy.

Although the retail environment offers unique perspectives on the well-being of individuals, scholars have hinted at and even fixated on "the risks of a retail apocalypse, whose emergence and impact on consumers could be causing harm to the sector" (Rippé et al., 2023.) While marketing promotes the idea that consumption satisfies desire, most psychological data shows that the main determinants of happiness in life are not related to consumption at all, but rather, by satisfaction with family life, work, leisure, and friendships (Soron, 2010.) Despite the marketing industry's attempt to promote the consumption of goods as an indicator of success and happiness, consumption is not an indicator of overall well-being. Pursuing physical possessions

will never fully satisfy our desire for happiness, but it can lead to overconsumption of products and resources, accelerating the rate of climate collapse.

**Chapter 3. The Elusive Green Consumer**

Many people emphasize that to avoid consumer overconsumption, consumers must purchase environmentally friendly products and adopt a sustainable lifestyle. While, in theory, this concept would significantly reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emissions emitted and substantially lower an individual's carbon footprint, several factors in The United States currently prevent this from being a viable solution. It is necessary to understand that various social factors impact an individual's ability to live a sustainable lifestyle. Intersectional Environmentalism, a term coined by author Leah Thomas, can be defined as an inclusive version of environmentalism that advocates for protecting both people and the planet (Thomas, 2022.) Intersectional Environmentalism identifies how injustices happening to marginalized groups and the earth are interconnected, highlighting that social injustices caused by differences in race, class, gender, etc., can impact the environment.

Living a sustainable lifestyle has essentially turned into a trend, driving up the prices of reusable items such as storage containers and organic groceries. Centering your lifestyle around sustainability is now a luxury many minority communities cannot afford. In this chapter, I will dive into the intricate relationship between issues of class and one's ability to adopt a sustainable lifestyle. I will begin with an overview of the sustainable business and consumer movement, emphasizing sectors within these movements requiring disposable income for participation. Furthermore, I will criticize the most recent mainstream, predominantly white, middle-class environmental movement that emerged in the 90s, noting how this movement has additionally

impacted the sustainable business sector in the United States. I aim to offer a nuanced and insightful analysis of the intersections between privilege and sustainability, highlighting that until this is resolved, promoting sustainably-focused lifestyles cannot be viewed as an answer to the current consumer overconsumption problem.

*History of The Sustainable Business Movement.* Modern business and the origins of the sustainable business movement date back to the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, along with the belief in individualism emphasized by the Calvinist Protestant Ethic. The Protestant Work Ethic, also known as the Calvinist Work Ethic, can be described as a work ethic emphasizing diligence and discipline due to an individual's subscription to values promoted by the Protestant faith, particularly Calvinism. At the time, it was widely believed that Protestant ethics and values, along with Calvinism doctrines of asceticism, enabled the rise and spread of capitalism (Coukous et al., 2005). While the origins of corporate business date as far back as the 11th century in Italy, legally incorporated shareholder-owned businesses rarely existed until the turn of the twentieth century, marking the Industrial Revolution as the starting point for the business industry (Chang, 2016.)

Throughout The First Industrial Revolution, which occurred roughly between 1760 and 1830 in America, foundations of intensified industrialization allowed for the creation of the steam engine, an invention credited for bringing coal and fossil fuels to the energy system, allowing for exponential economic growth on the basis of fossil fuels and GHG's (Greenhouse gases.) As the second Industrial Revolution began at the end of the 19th century, core inventions such as electricity, the combustion engine, and advancements in the chemical industry spurred substantial economic growth, catapulting the expansion of the business industry further. The inventions characterizing The Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the fossil fuel industry

marked the turning point of substantial environmental degradation, which began accelerating rapidly in the 1950s (Berquist, 2017.)

By the 1950s, many scientists began to emphasize that our planet had entered a new geological age, The Anthropocene, a period marked by significant human impact on the Earth. The Previous Age, known as The Holocene, began roughly 10,000-12,000 years prior when the temperature of Earth's atmosphere became warmer and more stable (Berquist, 2017.) It can be argued that The Anthropocene traces its roots back to the 1800s when the onset of The Industrial Revolution marked a significant shift. This era saw a rapid expansion in the use of fossil fuels as the primary driving force behind industrialization. Many historians argue that the 1950s marked the beginning of the second stage of The Anthropocene, known as The Great Acceleration, drawing attention to the explosion in population growth and unsustainable forms of energy following 1945 (Berquist, 2017.) The Great Acceleration primarily emphasizes these systems' adverse effects on Earth's natural systems, most critically, climate change, biodiversity loss, and nitrogen loads (Whiteman et al. 2013; Steffen et al. 2015). The historical development of fossil fuel use can be seen in Figure 1 below, emphasizing the acceleration of $CO_2$ emissions resulting from The Industrial Revolution (Berquist, 2017.)

Figure 1. *Carbon Dioxide Emissions from Fossil Fuels 1751-2007*
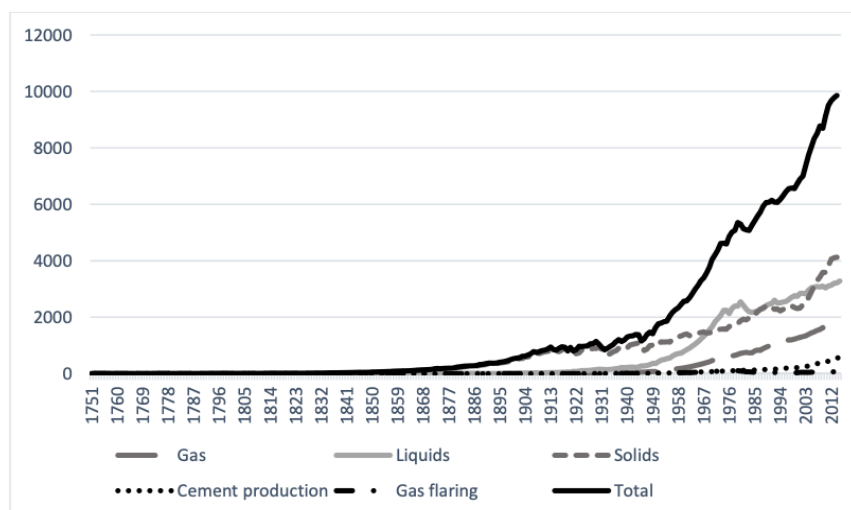


Source: Boden, T.A., G. Marland, and R.J. Andres. 2017. Global, Regional, and National Fossil-Fuel CO2 Emissions. Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy, Oak Ridge, Tenn., U.S .A http://cdiac.ornl.gov/ftp/ndp030/global.1751_2014.ems

The relentless use of fossil fuels characterized the 1950s. Coal was burned freely with no filters, and the air in industrial cities in Europe and America became increasingly gray and polluted. As environmental regulations had yet to be established, air and water pollution was released by production factories every day for nearly one hundred years (Balagopal, 2013.) By the middle of the twentieth century, global pollution levels were staggering. In December 1952, London was hit with "The Great Smog," a severe pollution event resulting in nearly four thousand deaths and over 100,000 hospitalizations (Balagopal, 2013.) Upon realizing the catastrophic effects industrialization and globalization were causing, citizens demanded that environmental regulations be passed. Industries were forced to pay for pollution damages and install expensive pollution treatment equipment in their production facilities; any companies that failed to comply with the law were forced to shut down and pay fines, a result that would cause profits to plummet (Balagopal, 2013.) As strict environmental regulations began to be passed,

companies started moving their production factories to China, where environmental laws were much less strictly enforced. It then became apparent that operating a business came at a cost; lines began to be drawn, with business on one side and the environment on another. It seemed as though the two could not co-exist.

Following the period of industrialization in the 50s, during the 1960s, the concept of "consumerism" was born. Cheaper products began to appear in the marketplace, specifically designed to last for short periods, allowing more goods to be produced and sold. With so much of the business industry's manufacturing already occurring overseas with very few environmental regulations, environmental impacts began to worsen. Throughout the '60s, it became clear that government regulations alone would never be enough; businesses would need to find their own reasons for pursuing sustainability. As war broke out in the Middle East in the 1970s, oil-producing nations closed their oil pipelines, leaving millions of people without gas. Oil prices shot up, the stock market crashed, and businesses stopped (Balagopal, 2013.) Through this, various corporations concluded that they could save money by using less fossil fuels and fewer materials in the production of their own products and services.

These companies initiated environmental compliance as they began doing more for the environment than the law required, taking their first steps toward sustainability. After the first implementations of corporate sustainability, companies realized their business reputations could greatly benefit from incorporating sustainable practices into their operations. If individuals believed a company was helping out in their community (such as by making safe and healthy products or treating their workers fairly), the company's reputation would improve, increasing customers. Companies began setting environmental regulations for themselves to follow in an attempt to increase their business reputation, a term that became recognized as "corporate social

responsibility" (Balagopal, 2013.) Many companies now view sustainability as essential to being competitive. Pursuing sustainability efforts not only saves costs but also works to increase business, making sustainability integral to many companies' core business strategies. Though sustainable business initially originated from the desire to save money, it was quickly realized that sustainability efforts also work to increase business, making sustainability integral to many companies' core business strategies today.

While corporate social responsibility remains integral to sustainable business models, it is more commonly referred to as environmental social governance (ESG) today. Virtually all of the world's largest companies now issue a yearly sustainability report discussing their sustainability efforts throughout the calendar year, setting goals to be even more ambitious the following year. More than 2,000 companies have set a science-based carbon target, with nearly one-third of Europe's largest public corporations pledging to reach net zero emissions by 2050 (Winston, 2022.) While these sustainability efforts made by corporations do not directly equate to a reduction in carbon emissions, it has become clear that climate change is no longer a fringe theory in the business world. Business leaders no longer doubt the evidence supporting sustainability's place on the business agenda. Companies are moving from minor, incremental improvements to much bolder, systematic approaches that can potentially create a net positive impact on the world, such as pledging to be carbon neutral.

Additionally, ESG has begun to take off in the finance world, as more banks are taking the consequences of environmental degradation more seriously. In 2022, for the fifth consecutive year, January kicked off with Larry Fink's letter to corporate CEOs and investors within his company. Fink, CEO of BlackRock, a multinational investment management corporation, emphasizes that "there is no company whose business model would not be profoundly affected

by the transition to a net zero economy… companies not quickly preparing themselves will see their business valuations suffer" sending out the message that managing climate and other ESG issues is necessary for every corporation's core business values (Winston, 2022.) Many banks already agree with Fink's statement, as JPMorgan, Chase, Morgan Stanley, and Bank of America have committed amounts between $1 trillion to $2.5 trillion to invest in climate action and sustainable development, such as affordable housing efforts to improve racial equality (Winston, 2022.) Furthermore, at the COP26 meeting in November 2021, a new group representing nearly $130 trillion in assets formed the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, co-chaired by Michael Bloomberg and former Bank of England head Mark Carney (Winston, 2022.) As the loud, predominantly youth voice is growing at an alarming rate, many young Millennials and members of Gen Z are beginning to speak out in the workplace. More than one thousand McKinsey consultants wrote an open letter to their bosses calling the consulting firm out for its work with fossil fuel companies and other clientele that could "alter the earth irrevocably" (Winston, 2022.) Engaged workers looking for workplaces that represent their personal values now make up more than 50% of the workforce. This demographic has the power, and they will use it.

To help manage ESG efforts in today's business industry, regulators will continue developing environmental standards for their companies. The IFRS Foundation, which sets international financial report standards, announced the formation of the International Sustainability Standards Board to aid in developing disclosure standards in 2021. In implementing these standards, there will be an increased harmonization of how companies report on their personal environmental impacts and social issues that are material to their business operations (Winston, 2022.)  Furthermore, with the fundamental gap in the US government's

ability to solve our biggest problems, we will see companies beginning to face even higher standards from their customers, the community, investors, and employees. More partnerships are continuing to pop up to tackle significant social issues. In 2021, the number of partnerships created to tackle environmental and social issues demonstrated an all-time high, as six banks came together to work on decarbonizing the steel industry, and a range of companies with big fleets partnered to call for the federal standards on electric vehicle charging and payments (Hoffman, 2018.)

It is becoming increasingly clear that environmental issues are not going away, requiring businesses to achieve solutions to tackle these issues. The ESG and sustainability "trends" will not abate anytime soon. Surveys show that 88% of graduate business school students believe that learning about environmental issues within the business industry is a priority, and 67% are looking for a future job incorporating environmental sustainability into the corporation (Hoffman, 2018.) With all this interest in environmental sustainability, we should expect to see eco-friendly and "green" products becoming more readily available and a decrease in carbon emissions and pollutants being emitted. So why have we yet to see a more sustainable world?

*Inequitable Access to Green Opportunities.* The rise of The Environmental and Sustainability movement in The United States is frequently criticized for its "elitist membership, not so much for that attribute in itself, but for the class-related attitudes and values that it implies and the selection of problems that this elitism determines" (Sills, 1974.) Although it appears that the world has largely woken up to the impending climate crisis, what appears to be emerging is an eco-critical and classist mentality holding that environmentalism and the sustainability movement are not achievable or inclusive for many individuals and communities. As environmentalism continues to grow, holding the spotlight for one of the most widely discussed

global issues today, many individuals in the upper-class, elite divisions of society have taken it

upon themselves to be the spokesperson for environmental concerns, encouraging more

environmentally friendly, sustainable ways of living. Primarily known for its disruptive yet

non-violent protests, the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion, widely supported by

various members of Hollywood's elite, has been incredibly successful in highlighting the

importance of climate action (Green, 2019.) While the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research

Into The Anthropocene highlights the significant influence of celebrities in shaping public

opinion and providing avenues for the general public to participate in climate action, some critics

point out the perceived hypocrisy and "out-of-touch elitism" associated with celebrities

endorsing environmental causes (Doyle et al., 2022.) When you have the same type of privileged

(typically wealthy, white individuals) driving the industry, the message does not translate across

a diverse group of people who want their actions to motivate change. Living a sustainable

lifestyle is a luxury many individuals cannot afford. A study on consumer behavior reveals that

although nearly 65% of global consumers are inclined to or intend to buy sustainably sourced

products, less than 25% of these consumers can afford the desired eco-friendly products (White

et al., 2023.) According to Bloomberg, environmentally friendly and sustainably sourced

products are still not affordable to the average consumer. Many sustainable branding and

marketing strategies are tailored to upper-class, wealthy, elite consumers, making the current

environmental and sustainable business movements widely inaccessible to the general population

(Benveniste, 2019.)

Moreover, since the beginning of The Environmental Movement in the '60s and '70s,

popular sentiment has been held that sustainability is a hobby for only wealthy, white, privileged

individuals (Morrison et al., 1986.) Subjected groups, such as people of color and the poor

working class, could not envision themselves as being a part of the environmental culture. It is important to emphasize that this does not mean minority groups do not understand the urgency of environmental collapse or do not want to contribute by living a sustainable lifestyle; however, these populations either simply have more urgent problems to deal with in their lives, or do not have the financial means to participate in the eco-lifestyle movement. While someone's shoes might have been made in unethical, forced child labor conditions, this individual may have no other alternative when it comes to purchasing shoes, as sustainability is a luxury that many people, unfortunately, cannot afford. In a capitalistic sense, sustainability has become a sort of exclusive club in which participation is only allowed for those who can pay the high prices. Regardless of whether a product is sourced sustainably or simply utilizes the proper marketing techniques to back up claims of sustainability (which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter), consumers will not be able to purchase these products unless they have a disposable income allowing them to budget for high-priced and luxury products.

Furthermore, many people in our capitalistic society simply lack the disposable income to purchase these luxury items. Living paycheck to paycheck is an unfortunate reality that many face today, with the federal minimum wage at a staggering $7.25 per hour and nearly one-third of all college-educated individuals facing student debts of at least $25,000 (United States Department of Labor, 2023.) Because of this, it is evident that socioeconomic class plays a significant role in who can participate in climate action as sustainable alternatives are often priced higher than standard, mass-produced products as high prices for goods result from better, more ethical, environmentally friendly standards. Additionally, capitalism raises the issue of consumer overconsumption as consumers are often pushed to buy specific clothing, household items, or appliances for the sake of owning goods that are more "sustainable" or are deemed to

be better for the environment. However, research has noted that more affluence is actually

hurting the environment, not helping it (Weidmann et al., 2022.) Owning more money means, in

turn, purchasing more products that you believe will aid in bringing you to a higher social status

or better standing due to sustainability being currently viewed as a trend. Euro News summarizes

this research by noting that consumers simply need to purchase fewer products in general rather

than loading up on items they believe are environmentally friendly, additionally highlighting that

consumption by wealthy households is responsible for the most considerable human impact on

the environment (Frost, 2022.) Although some environmentalists will argue that investing in an

expensive set of reusable paper towels or purchasing high-quality clothing designed to last a long

time are worthy investments for the environment, a true investment for our planet is consuming

less altogether.

As we discuss the need for consumers to curb their consumption habits, it becomes

apparent that the solution lies beyond simply opting to purchase environmentally friendly goods.

While purchasing sustainable goods is a step in the right direction, this is not a feasible

alternative for many individuals in the United States due to our current capitalistic framework,

which requires a more profound shift toward reducing overall consumption. Furthermore, as our

current "sustainable business" framework recognizes and capitalizes on consumers' increasing

desire to live a sustainable lifestyle for those who can afford it, an emphasis is placed on

consumers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainable products, inadvertently creating a

system where environmental responsibility becomes a privilege for the affluent.

*The High Cost of Conscientious Consumerism.* In the last few years, the push for

sustainability within the business industry has gained momentum, reflecting the shift towards

increased environmental practices. Companies now proudly display eco-friendly labels, promise

customers reduced carbon footprints, and guarantee the use of ethically sourced labor and materials. However, as we take a closer look within our current sustainable business framework, cracks begin to emerge beneath the surface, revealing a harsh, troubling reality. At the heart of the sustainable business framework lies a paradox; the sustainability we so proudly champion frequently becomes a privilege reserved only for the wealthy. We find ourselves in a reality where environmental responsibility comes at a premium, creating a prominent divide between those who can afford sustainable goods and those who cannot. This inherent inequality in our sustainable business model raises profound questions about the true nature of our progress towards a greener world, highlighting the industry's focus on capitalizing on consumers with the means and desires to invest in sustainable goods. In this chapter, I will emphasize the flaws embedded within our current sustainable business paradigm to uncover the ways in which companies manipulate perceptions to capitalize on the growing demand for sustainability, specifically through the phenomenon of greenwashing. I aim to explore the implications of greenwashing and its role in consumer decision-making, highlighting the necessary corporate accountability that needs to be developed.

Within the last few decades, environmental awareness has grown within society, particularly in the minds of consumers, leaving modern-day customers eager to purchase environmentally friendly and sustainable goods. Consumer attitudes towards the environment have slowly changed as consumers continue to realize the added impact of their consumption behavior on climate change and environmental degradation. This shift in consumer behavior, often referred to as "green purchasing power," has compelled organizations to rethink their strategies and adapt to evolving market demands (Yang et al., 2020.) In an age where Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is becoming increasingly expected, organizations are beginning to

realize that they cannot continue to profit without adopting more social responsibility. A positive social and environmental performance, known as the "triple-bottom-line," has become imperative for all organizations, as research suggests that a proactive CSR approach is not just beneficial but essential for sustained growth and profitability (De Jong et al., 2017.) Likewise, firms have been found to have three primary motivations for adopting CSR policies: contributing to society, generating financial benefits, and meeting the social expectations of consumers and stakeholders (De Jong et al., 2017.) Research conducted by Nielsen Media presented that 66% of global consumers are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products, suggesting that when consumers perceive firms as being socially responsible, they are increasingly likely to purchase products from these organizations at a higher price (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) This increasing environmental awareness has led to a surge in demand for green products, typically characterized as recyclable, organic, made from recycled materials, or produced with a lower carbon footprint (Volschenk et al., 2022.) As the demand for sustainable products continues to grow, so does the supply, and the claims made by organizations about the eco-friendliness of their offerings.

The rise in demand for sustainable products has led to the proliferation of greenwashing strategies among organizations looking to capitalize on the trend toward environmentally conscious goods. As defined by Miriam Webster, greenwashing is "the practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect the attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities" (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) This deceptive practice aims to mislead consumers about the true environmental impact of products or services. The higher a product's perceived "greenness," the more likely consumers are to purchase it, even if the environmental claims are not entirely true. Evidence from NielsenIQ

indicated that some demographic groups, such as higher-income households, urban and suburban residents, and households with more children, are more likely to buy products that make one or more ESG-related claims, which are typically sold at a premium (Mckinsey & Company, 2023.) While some companies genuinely do invest in green marketing and communications to produce eco-friendly products and be perceived as socially engaged, the harsh reality behind corporate environmentalism is extremely disappointing. Research highlights that 95% of products claiming to be green in The United States and Canada have committed at least one of the "Sins Of Greenwashing" (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) As the seven "Sins Of Greenwashing" are imperative in understanding greenwashing and its prevalence in our current sustainable business framework, I will define and describe each tactic below.

TerraChoice, an environmental marketing firm, has composed a classification known as "the Seven Sins of Greenwashing" to outline the primary methods organizations use to mislead consumers with environmental claims (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) The first method, known as the Sin of Hidde Trade-off, involves marketing claims that label a product as "green" based on a narrow set of attributes, ignoring more critical environmental concerns. For instance, TerraChoice highlights that although paper might be sourced from a sustainably harvested forest, this alone does not guarantee its eco-friendliness. Vital environmental considerations, such as greenhouse gas emissions and the use of chlorine in the bleaching process during paper production, are often overlooked. Despite being equally essential to the paper-making process, these factors are masked by the Sin of Hidden Trade-offs. Notably, in the study conducted by TerraChoice, this approach was the most common, with 57% of the products analyzed found to make such claims (University of Saskatchewan, 2007.)

The second method, known as the Sin Of No Proof, refers to environmental claims that lack support from easily accessible information or a reliable third-party certification. TerraChoice points out that facial tissues and toilet paper products often claim to be made with specific percentages of post-consumer recycled materials without offering evidence to back these claims. When an organization asserts a percentage or statistic without providing a verifiable method to confirm it, such as fine-print details or a URL of additional information, the claim falls into the category of having no proof. Environmental claims are frequently posted on the packaging of goods to catch the eyes of consumers, but they often lack evidence to substantiate the statements, resulting in faulty advertising. In TerraChoice's study, 26% of the products examined were found to commit the Sin of No Proof, making it the second most utilized 'sin' (University of Saskatchewan, 2007.)

The third method, known as "the Sin Of Vagueness," involves poorly defined or overly broad claims. Such vague claims run a higher risk of being misunderstood by consumers. For example, claims stating that a product is "all-natural" often fall into this category, as it can be argued that naturally occurring substances like arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde, though toxic, are indeed naturally produced and found in nature. It is crucial to note that "all-natural" does not necessarily coincide with sustainability. Similarly, the label "non-toxic" is commonly seen on packaging, but it can be argued that all substances are "non-toxic" when utilized in particular doses. When environmental terms are used without clear explanation, it often indicates the use of the "Sin of Vagueness." TerraChoice underscores that in their research, 11% of the products analyzed employ this tactic, including items such as garden insecticides, hair mousse, general household cleaners, and more (University of Saskatchewan, 2007.)

Fourth, "the Sin Of Worshiping False Labels" pertains to products that deceive customers into believing they have undergone a legitimate green certification process through misleading suggestions or images resembling certifications. For example, a product featuring packaging with a logo that closely resembles that of an environmental certification claiming to "combat global warming" falls into the category of worshiping false labels (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) Companies often try to imitate well-known environmental certification logos or create logos with similar elements, aiming to give customers the impression that the product is environmentally friendly.

Fifth, "the Sin Of Irrelevance" refers to environmental claims that, while technically accurate, are not helpful for individuals seeking out genuinely environmentally friendly or eco-conscious products. For example, TerraChoice highlights the common use of the statement "CFC-free" in product advertising despite the fact that chlorofluorocarbons were banned by The Montreal Protocol in 1987, which prohibited the use of ozone-depleting substances in the production of goods (Velders et al., 2007.) Nevertheless, Terrachoice's research reveals numerous individual products displaying "CFC-free" as a unique environmental benefit, such as insecticides, lubricants, oven-cleaners, shaving gels, window cleaners, disinfectants, and more (University of Saskatchewan, 2007.) While it is accurate that the mentioned products do not contain CFCs, the same applies to all other products within those categories, making the specific products labeled as "CFC-free" seem greener than they genuinely are. TerraChoice found that 4% of the products examined included statements exploying these claims (University of Saskatchewan, 2007).

Next, the sixth sin of greenwashing, known as "the Sin Of Lesser Of Two Evils," refers to a product marketed with factual claims with the intention to divert consumers' attention away

from the inherent harm the entire product category poses to the environment. This strategy of presenting a product as the "lesser evil" within its category aims to make consumers feel better about choosing a product, even though the entire category is environmentally harmful (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) For instance, while organic cigarettes made with organically grown tobacco and unbleached paper might seem less harmful than conventional cigarettes, smoking itself and the entire cigarette industry are inherently unsustainable and unhealthy. Brands often use labels such as "green" and "organic" on products with questionable environmental benefits to distract consumers from the larger negative impacts of the industry. Regardless of the materials used in production, buying cigarettes has no environmental benefit (University of Saskatchewan, 2007.) TerraChoices research highlights that approximately 1% of environmental claims made by products fall into the Sin of Lesser Evils category (University of Saskatchewan, 2007).

Lastly, the seventh and final sin of greenwashing, as defined by TerraChoice, is the Sin Of Fibbing, which involves the use of outright false environmental claims. For instance, TerraChoice highlights instances where certain shampoo brands claim to be "certified-organic," yet their research found no evidence of such certification. TerraChoice also mentions a dishwasher detergent falsely labeled as being packaged in "100% recycled paper" when it was, in fact, packaged in plastic (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) In TerraChoice's research sample, less than 1% of the examined products fell into the Sin of Fibbing category, making it one of the least utilized greenwashing tactics (University of Saskatchewan, 2007).

Moreover, while the Seven Sins are widely recognized as the most common greenwashing method, it is essential to emphasize other tactics TerraChoice does not explicitly mention within the Seven Sins framework. Paraguel et al. emphasize a form of greenwashing known as 'Executional Greenwashing' (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) This type of greenwashing

does not rely on the previously discussed methods but instead employs nature-evoking elements. These elements may include images using colors often associated with the environment, such as blues and greens, backgrounds depicting natural landscapes such as mountains, forests, or oceans, pictures of endangered animals like pandas or dolphins, or imagery of renewable energy sources such as wind turbines and waterfalls among others (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.) Whether used intentionally or not, these depictions of nature create a false perception of a brand's 'greenness' in the minds of consumers. According to Hartmann, Apaolaza, and Parguel et al., including these elements can "subtly trigger ecological inferences by activating implicit references to nature through nature imagery (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020.)

It is imperative to recognize that while these greenwashing tactics are viewed as inherently deceptive, there exists a positive correlation between their use and consumer attitudes toward products. Numerous studies have illustrated that consumers' positive perceptions of a product's green qualities significantly impact their intentions to purchase, leading to a greater willingness to pay a price premium (Volschenk et al., 2022.) Furthermore, in a 2020 survey by McKinsey & Company on US consumer sentiment, over 60% of respondents emphasized a willingness to pay a higher price for products that present sustainable packaging or environmental marketing claims (Am et al., 2023.) Furthermore, products with ESG-related claims have experienced an average cumulative growth of 28% over the past five years, in contrast to the 20% growth observed for products lacking in such ESG claims, as demonstrated in Figure 3 below (Am et al., 2023.)

Figure 3.  *Products making ESG claims achieving disproportionate growth.*

**Products that make environmental, social, and governance-related claims have achieved disproportionate growth.**

**Retail sales growth, US, CAGR 2018–22,** %

| | |
|---|---|
| Products without ESG[1]-related claims | 4.7 |
| Products with ESG-related claims | 6.4 |

+1.7 *percentage points*

[1]Environmental, social, and governance.
Source: NielsenIQ

McKinsey & Company

As the growth of products making environmental marketing claims reflects an increasing demand for sustainable goods, it becomes crucial to acknowledge the emergence of a market segment that takes advantage of those willing and able to pay for sustainability. The prevalence of greenwashing techniques within our current sustainable business landscape highlights a troubling reality— the commodification of environmental responsibility. By capitalizing on the willingness of individuals to pay premiums for sustainability, businesses perpetuate a system wherein environmental action becomes a privilege of the affluent. This framework exacerbates the gap between those who can afford eco-friendly options and those who cannot. It is imperative that we scrutinize these practices and emphasize the adoption of sustainable practices to impact the environment, not sales, positively. It is necessary to advocate for a more equitable approach to environmental stewardship, one where sustainability is not a luxury but a fundamental right for all. Recognizing the need for a shift in our sustainable business model, the following chapter will provide a comprehensive overview of the existing policies aimed at promoting accessibility to sustainability worldwide. This analysis aims to dissect what strides have already been made towards accessible sustainable consumption and what further advancements can still be achieved.

**Chapter 4. Political Pathways to Sustainability**

Through the pursuit of fostering sustainable consumption patterns to avoid environmental collapse, this chapter delves into a comprehensive list of existing policies to mitigate consumer overconsumption and provide equitable access to sustainable goods and services. Acknowledging the critical need for effective interventions at various levels, this discussion will emphasize a literature review of various governmental initiatives, highlighting policies enacted by both governmental and environmental organizations. Additionally, this chapter will explore corporate-level endeavors, shedding light on initiatives designed to reduce consumer consumption. This multi-faceted approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of policies already in place at various levels and their collective impact on fostering sustainability and curbing the overconsumption crisis. By reviewing and critiquing these policies, I hope to gain insights from the efficiencies of these existing interventions and highlight areas of improvement to contribute to the ongoing discourse of how to effectively reduce consumer consumption in Chapter 5. This chapter serves as a foundational step toward my final chapter, including my policy initiatives and governmental interventions for consumer overconsumption.

*Green Governance.* To begin, it is essential to note that there is a gap in governmental policies to enhance the affordability and accessibility of sustainable products for consumers who prioritize shopping sustainably. The challenge primarily lies in producing sustainably sourced goods at a lower price, a difficulty many corporations face. This is predominantly due to ensuring fair wages and working conditions for those involved in the production process, which is necessary when producing products sustainably. Furthermore, the procurement of sustainable materials incurs a high cost for ethically produced products. Without governmental support, it is nearly impossible for corporations to decrease the expenses associated with manufacturing

eco-friendly products. Although government assistance is necessary to reduce the price of sustainable goods, unfortunately, there is a lack of government programs such as subsidies or tax incentives that serve to assist businesses in reducing the cost of sustainable goods, hindering the ability of businesses to increase the accessibility of sustainability. Due to this noted gap in environmental policy I found throughout my research, I will dive further into the need for effective subsidies for sustainable goods in the following chapter, Chapter 5.

While no environmental policies currently enhance the accessibility and affordability of sustainable goods, various initiatives are in place to mandate deceptive environmental claims, ensuring businesses cannot take advantage of those who possess the privilege to pay premiums for sustainability, as discussed in the previous chapter. Australia's Trade Practices Act of 1974, (TPA) prohibits, among other things, any misleading or deceptive conduct or misrepresentations in advertising (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008.) The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has additionally published guidance on what this means for environmental advertising claims in particular. The publication indicated that the ACCC could take legal action against corporations who engage in deceptive advertising or breach any of the conduct listed in the TPA (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2008.)

Furthermore, in 2010, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) issued a "Framework for Responsible Environmental Marketing Communications," which laid out requirements and specifications for corporations who wished to make "self-declared" environmental or sustainability claims. The framework includes a user-friendly checklist that advertisers can use and complete to assist in ensuring that all self-made environmental claims are accurate and in no way misleading (OECD Environmental Claims, 2009.) The checklist includes

questions such as "Did you use reasonable bias for the expressed and implied claim(s) you are making?", "Did you use substantiating scientific data supporting the claim at the time it was made?", "Does the data reflect sound scientific principles likely to be accepted by experts qualified by education, training, and experience in the field?" and so forth (International Chamber of Commerce, 2021.) These international initiatives have worked to advance the advertising industry's regulations regarding sustainability claims, inspiring further recommendations such as preventing misleading claims regarding ecological aspects of production, packaging, distribution, consumption, and disposal of goods and services.

In addition, various international environmental initiatives are in place to encourage reduced consumption efforts. One of the notable efforts is encapsulated in the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 12—The Responsible Consumption and Production Goal. This goal outlines a ten-year framework dedicated to sustainable production and consumption programs across all United Nations member countries, considering the development and capabilities of nations, particularly those in the developing world. (UNEP, 2012.)  Adopted in 2012, the framework encompasses six programs to foster Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) patterns for all UN nations. These programs include Sustainable Public Procurement, Consumer Information for SCP, Sustainable Tourism, Sustainable Lifestyles and Education, Sustainable Buildings and Construction, and Sustainable Food Systems. Executed through a multi-stakeholder partnership, these programs strive to accelerate the United Nations toward patterns of sustainable production and consumption (One Planet Network, 2012.)

Furthermore, Goal 12 sets a target to attain sustainable management by efficiently utilizing natural resources and reducing per capita global food waste by half per consumer, retail,

and supply-chain levels by 2030 (UNEP, 2012.) Goal 12 also calls for promoting sustainable practices among companies, particularly large, transnational corporations, urging them to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycles per national policies and priorities. (UNEP, 2012.) The goal's emphasis on encouraging sustainability practices among large corporations is pivotal as businesses play a central role in global consumption and production patterns. Integrating sustainability in corporations' reporting cycles enhances customer transparency and facilitates informed consumer choices, promoting a shift toward consuming environmentally and socially responsible products. This framework serves as a critical standard for future governmental initiatives by offering a comprehensive framework to address the need for various aspects of sustainable consumption to reduce environmental degradation fueled by our day-to-day systems.

Next, Sweden's *Think Twice!* initiative includes a fully integrated sustainable consumption program for the nation, including a four-year plan focused on household consumption, educating citizens on how to eat, live, and travel sustainably. The initiative underscores the Swedish government's commitment to sustainable consumption while empowering individuals to make impactful behavioral changes and increasing consumer commitment to the issue of sustainable consumption (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.) Central to the initiative are three pivotal areas identified by Sweden as responsible for over half of the adverse impacts on health, society, and the environment: sustainable eating, living, and traveling. To enable Swedish citizens with the tools to live a sustainable lifestyle, *Think Twice!* lays out a range of proposed governmental initiatives to incentivize and promote living within planetary boundaries (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.)

First, the plan defines a method for a recurring forum on sustainable household consumption, which aims to broaden the dialogue on sustainability issues, raise critical questions for discussion, and foster cross-sector collaboration. Additionally, the initiative highlights the need for increased access to education on sustainable development at all education levels, from preschool all the way up to higher education, such as university and post-graduate programs (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.) An example of this framework can be seen in Sweden's Higher Education Act, which mandated the integration of sustainable development principles into the curriculum. Sweden emphasizes the belief that sustainable development is an integral part of the education framework. This policy initiative integrates discussions on sustainable household consumption into key school subjects such as "Home Economics" and "Consumer Affairs" within Sweden's educational system. Moreover, legislation has been enacted to ensure these topics are also incorporated across various other subjects through Sweden's school system (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.)

Furthermore, to promote sustainable consumption, the *Think Twice!* plan includes a variety of proposed legislation for sustainable travel measures, including an air tax on all travel done by airplane, tax reductions for environmental improvements made to single-family homes, and financial support for household environmental initiatives such as transitioning away from direct electric heating. Notably, Sweden introduced tax reductions in 2004 for energy-efficient infrastructure in single-family homes, mainly targeting biofuel installations for heating, aiming to encourage energy-efficient measures in buildings intended for permanent residences. Moreover, the plan suggests mandatory monthly electricity readings for all Swedish households to persuade construction companies to invest in sustainable infrastructure moving forward. The

Swedish government hopes consumers will achieve improved energy efficiency through the increased frequency of meter readings, which will help the environment and reduce expected monthly finances (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.) To promote sustainable eating practices, *Think Twice!* advocates for organic food consumption, highlighting proposed legislation to support farmers adhering to quality certification standards such as the Swedish Seal of Quality, which ensures proper labeling of organic products for consumers (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.) In alignment with the vision, the Swedish National Food Administration introduced new guidelines in 2005 for improved school and workplace meals. These guidelines adhere to Swedish nutritional recommendations, aiming to cultivate healthy eating habits and prevent the development of unhealthy dietary practices. Noteworthy revisions include stricter criteria for fat and food fiber content, alongside the introduction of criteria for sugar and salt content in certain food groups (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.)

Lastly, to encourage ethical food consumption, The Swedish Fairtrade Labelling Organization received a grant of SEK 1.6 million (approximately USD 156,000) to actively engage the public in discussions about ethical and sustainable eating practices (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Consumer Affairs Sweden, 2005.) Although Sweden's comprehensive plan for sustainable consumption is still evolving, the *Think Twice!* framework serves as a foundational example for future government-mandated sustainability initiatives and legislation.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize a historical period when nations embraced sustainable consumption with minimal drawbacks. Among the affluent nations of Europe and North America, World War II stands out as a period resembling sustainable consumption practices. Within this context, it is crucial to understand that "sustainable" refers to consumption levels

adhering to the constraints imposed by extraordinary wartime circumstances rather than the ecological limits of consumption later understood in the 19600s (Theien, 2009.) Although the reduction of consumption during World War II served a vastly different purpose from today's imperative to combat climate change, the wartime model of optimizing consumption can serve as a model for sustainable consumption practices today.

The central concern during the war era was the meticulous regulation of goods across Europe and America to maintain acceptable consumption levels and dwindling supplies of essential food, textiles, fuel, and other necessities needed for the war effort. At the heart of wartime consumption regulation was rationing— a detailed yet flexible system allowing specific quantities of goods to individuals based on criteria such as age, gender, occupation, health conditions, and more. Individuals received booklets of coupons specifying their monthly allowances, which they had to present before purchasing during the war period. The rationing system tightly controlled spending, allowing consumers to acquire only what was necessary for survival for themselves and their families (Theien, 2009.) Lizabeth Cohen, in her book on the evolving American consumer of the 20th century, *A Consuners' Republic,* notes that wartime consumers were, above all, citizens prioritizing social responsibility over personal needs. Patriotism was an essential source of inspiration for consumers who were recognized as valuable participants in the national war effort through their adherence to rationing (Theien, 2009).

While administering rationing required significant government involvement, it's noteworthy that the system garnered substantial public support during the war years, especially in countries where policymakers effectively communicated the importance of rationing for the war effort. It is also worth acknowledging that the rationing system extended to European countries occupied by Germany, such as Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, and others. In these

nations, where motivations lacked those of American citizens to save resources for the benefit of

the men fighting abroad, the rationing system still found acceptance (Theien, 2009.) In normal

circumstances, the idea of rationing consumer goods might not appeal to individuals.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent challenges of rationing, there were minimal complaints about

the system itself during the war period. Citizens' desire to support their nations often outweighed

the inconveniences of acquiring the coupons and poor food quality, leading to a largely

complaint-free system; grievances did not amount to any protest against the actual rationing

system itself (Theien, 2009.) Under this framework, rationing during the wartime period meant

that consumption transcended the private area of households and entered the area of national

politics, something modern-day policies for sustainable consumption have largely failed to do.

It is essential to consider whether the lack of success in promoting sustainable

consumption in the contemporary world has more to do with the lack of political definition in our

governmental systems than citizens' unwillingness to participate in reduced consumption efforts.

The current political landscape offers a contradictory message to consumers, unlike the clear

directive given during World War II to consume less for the greater good. While the link between

consumer behavior and the climate crisis isn't as firmly established as that between consumption

and wartime efforts, it's crucial to contemplate how consumers would respond to government

regulations emphasizing the severe implications of their consumption choices for our future

(Theien, 2009.) Drawing from lessons of World War II, it becomes evident that a robust political

framework can enforce equitable consumption practices, where consumers trust they receive

their fair share of available goods without advantage to those with greater means. This historical

context suggests that active government involvement is essential in shaping consumption

patterns with lasting impacts  (Theien, 2009.) The wartime era serves as a compelling reminder

of a time when citizens willingly embraced reduced consumption to benefit those besides themselves. The World War II period of rationing begs the question of whether contemporary citizens would respond similarly to mitigate the environmental consequences of ongoing consumption trends in the face of climate change and if there is anything we can effectively take from this period of policymaking and citizen cooperation.

While it has been demonstrated that numerous international initiatives have worked towards curbing overconsumption in the past and fostering equitable access to sustainability, it is crucial to highlight the limited efforts made by the United States government in this regard. A significant milestone was marked on September 16th, 2015, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) jointly introduced the U.S. 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction goal— a groundbreaking commitment marking the nation's first-ever goal to tackle the issue of food loss and waste (Buzby et al., 2020.) Notably, food waste ranks as the most prevalent material in U.S. landfills and incinerators, with approximately 30-40% of the nation's food supply going unconsumed. This unused food wastes the food itself and the valuable resources expended in its production, giving rise to inadvertent environmental impacts (U.S. EPA, 2019.)

Moreover, with over 85% of current greenhouse gas emissions linked to food waste activities before disposal (including transportation, processing, and distribution), the imperative for proactive governmental interventions becomes undeniably evident (U.S. EPA, 2019.) In response, the United States set forth the ambitious 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal, aiming to halve food loss and waste by 2030. This aligns specifically with the aforementioned 2030 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal Target 12.3, which focuses on reductions in food waste across food retail, food services, and finally, households (U.S. EPA, 2019.)

However, as of 2019, the U.S. is still facing a considerable journey ahead of its goal of reaching

the 2030 goal. Between the baseline year of 2016 and the latest estimates in 2019, there has been

a concerning 6% increase in per capita food exiting the human supply chain (U.S. EPA, 2019.)

Despite the goal's aim to reduce wasted per capita food supply, it is evident that the benchmarks

set by the U.S. 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal need to be more robust to achieve the

intended outcomes. As of 2023, the EPA and USDA have yet to establish baselines for food loss,

impending the ability to track progress toward this vital aspect of the national goal (U.S. EPA,

2019.) These shortcomings in U.S. governmental legislation concerning consumer waste and

consumption underscore the pressing need for heightened accountability and strengthened

legislation to avoid environmental collapse.

*Business Innovations and Consumer Choices*. While U.S governmental and

environmental organizations have demonstrated shortcomings in overconsumption legislation,

numerous sustainable businesses have independently claimed the initiative to enhance

sustainability access and reduce overall consumption levels through their corporations. Many

corporations, namely Best Buy, have incorporated recycling programs into their business models,

urging consumers to repurpose their used or unwanted products. Since 2009, Best Buy has

accepted personal electronics such as headphones, alarm clocks, desktop computers,

refrigerators, and various other items, irrespective of whether they were initially bought at Best

Buy. While the company does charge a $10 fee for larger electronics such as TVs and computers,

a $10 Best Buy gift card is offered as compensation for consumers needing to replace their

devices (Heim, 2009.) Given that numerous materials found in electronic waste, such as lead,

cadmium, chromium, and mercury, pose significant health risks, including damage to the nervous

and reproductive systems when inadequately disposed of—leading to severe health problems,

recycling initiatives like Best Buy's play a crucial role in preventing harm to individuals and the

environment from e-waste (Saphores et al., 2011.) Lastly, recycling e-waste is vital for

conserving natural resources, considering the amount of precious metals used in production. For

instance, in 2007, the electronics sector used 13% of the world's palladium production, 15% of

cobalt, and over  80% of indium and ruthenium. Recycling offers an opportunity to reclaim many

of these natural materials, as most electronic devices are nearly 100% recyclable (UNEP, 2009.)

By reusing valuable materials instead of relying on mining, recycling e-waste significantly

contributes to conserving natural resources, mitigating the acceleration of environmental

collapse.

Furthermore, given that a significant portion of product packaging is currently designed

for single-use and disposal, with containers and packaging comprising 23% of landfill material

along with being a primary source of litter polluting beaches and waterways, it is clear that

packaging plays a significant role in the degradation of the environment (EPA, 2014.) In an effort

to mitigate the environmental impact of rising consumption levels, various brands are opting to

transition away from conventional packaging materials such as plastic and styrofoam. Instead,

sustainable businesses are adopting alternative packaging options, including recycled paper,

cardboard, plant-based plastics, and compostable materials. Not only do these eco-friendly

alternatives assist in reducing carbon footprint, but they also work to promote a circular economy

by closing the loop through the recycling and composting processes (Saveth, 2023.)

Furthermore, sustainable packaging goes beyond the choice of materials used. Sustainable

packaging embraces innovative design approaches that aim to optimize packaging efficiency.

Minimalist packaging, for instance, strives to eliminate unnecessary layers, focusing on

packaging simplicity and functionality. This not only reduces waste, but enhances the brand's overall aesthetic (Saveth, 2023.)

As outlined in the brand's Corporate Responsibility Report, PVH, the global apparel company owning Calvin Klein, has pledged to have packaging made of one hundred percent sustainable and ethically sourced materials by 2025 (PVH, 2022.) Since making the commitment to eco-friendly packaging in 2021, Calvin Klein has saved over 200 tons of plastic annually by utilizing paper composed of at least 50% recycled content for all their packaged clothing in North America (PVH, 2022.) Furthermore, PVH became the first apparel company to join the "How2Recycle" initiative in 2019, focused on creating a clear, nationally harmonized label that enables companies to convey to consumers how to dispose of a package properly (Bhawana et al., 2022.) Acknowledging the shortcomings of the municipal waste and recycling programs, the How2Recycle initiative is dedicated to providing clear, detailed instructions on recycling waste from packaged goods. This initiative is crucial as containers and packaging amounted to 82.2 million tons of generation in the municipal solid waste landfill in 2018, primarily attributed to the complexity of recycling information (EPA, 2018.) While PVH is now one of many apparel brands taking part in the initiative, it has set a precedent for the importance of sustainable packaging in the clothing industry. Currently, 74% of Calvin Klein's packaging is entirely recyclable, on target to reach its 2025 goal, with PVH additionally aiming to be a zero-waste corporation by 2030 (Ikram, 2022.)

Lastly, while recycling programs and sustainable packaging alternatives enhance access to sustainability through significant corporations, several corporations are taking the leap to put sustainability above profits through anti-consumption campaigns. Patagonia has gained prominence for its anti-consumption marketing campaigns, particularly surrounding the holiday

"Black Friday," traditionally recognized as the biggest shopping day of the year in The United States. This day, following Thanksgiving, marks the arrival of the holiday shopping season for many, as numerous stores entice customers with heavily promoted sales and discounted prices. Although Black Friday is traditionally associated with holiday shopping, these brands distinguish themselves by discouraging excessive consumption. In contrast to the common trend of impulsive purchases driven by attractive discounts, Patagonia advocates for mindful consumption, urging consumers to reconsider their shopping habits. With growing concern about brands' role in the climate crisis and the impact of hyper-consumerism, advertisers are rejecting the retail holiday entirely, asking customers not to spend money with them.

In 2011, Patagonia made a noteworthy stand against Black Friday consumption, with a striking advertisement in The New York Times highlighting the phrase "Don't Buy This Jacket," featuring an image of one of their top-selling fleece jackets, aimed to draw attention to the negative environmental impacts associated with its production. Patagonia revealed that manufacturing their highly-rated fleece jackets required 135 liters of water, approximately the daily requirement for 45 individuals, 20 pounds of carbon dioxide (24 times the jacket's weight), and the amount of waste produced (two-thirds of the jacket's weight in waste.) This declaration served as a compelling call to consumers as the brand urged them to reflect on their needs before making any purchases, discouraging consumption and encouraging responsible purchasing habits (Combs, 2019.) While the campaign saw significant success as the initiative contributed to the brand's overall image as a leader in the sustainable apparel industry, with AdWeek claiming it the "Ad of the day" due to its boldness, the campaign also created many disadvantages (Nudd, 2011.) Many consumers criticized the advertisement, accusing Patagonia of hypocrisy, stating that the brand sought increased public attention to increase sales. In response to backlash over

the campaign, Patagonia's CEO emphasized that "to lighten our environmental footprint, everyone needs to consume less. Businesses need to make fewer things but of higher quality. Customers need to think twice before they buy" (New York Times, 2022.) Although the company's sales increased to more than $543 million, noticing a 30% increase in sales following the implementation of the campaign, Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" initiative served to raise awareness of an increasingly pressing problem, urging consumers to consider their environmental impact and reduce their consumption when purchasing goods that are not necessities (Hwang, 2016.)

Although these initiatives undertaken by businesses represent crucial strides toward reducing consumer consumption, it is essential to recognize that aside from anti-consumption campaigns, these efforts do not directly address the core issues of reducing the actual volume of consumption. Instead, these efforts work to mitigate the environmental impact of existing consumption patterns. Although minimizing harm in any form is commendable, initiatives aimed to decrease consumption outright have the potential for a more enduring environmental impact. It is crucial to understand that the government and sustainable business organizations in the United States have demonstrated substantially limited initiatives to actively reduce consumption; there is significant room for improvement.

**Chapter 5. Mindful Consumption for The Future of Our Planet**

In a world where consumerism is deeply rooted in societal norms, addressing the issue of consumer overconsumption requires an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond simply urging individuals to reduce their consumption. Although reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable practices are important, various constraints prevent reduced individual

consumption from effectively mitigating the global climate crisis. To begin, it is crucial to understand that the existence of both internal and external sociocultural standards works in a way that prevents us from achieving the goal of reducing our individual carbon footprint to a bare minimum. Cherrier et al. emphasize in their work, *Barriers to downward carbon emission: Exploring sustainable consumption in the face of the glass floor,* that while internal societal standards are primarily connected to our personal social imaginary, external societal standards are linked to the societal construction of needs (Cherrier et al., 2012.) Because of this, there are limits to reducing carbon emissions in terms of socially constructed needs. Although needs are interpersonal, and our peers do not have the autonomy to identify what a "true" or "false" need is, there are societal standards that emphasize what is "normal" and what is "unusual" (Cherrier et al., 2012.) Due to societal standards in place, often, when individuals emphasize a desire to decrease their carbon footprint or make lifestyle choices out of environmental concern, deviance from the norm is penalized due to social and cultural order expectations.

For instance, Cherrier et al. present a case featuring Jenny, a 48-year-old woman deeply committed to environmentalism and determined to minimize her carbon footprint (Cherrier et al., 2012.) Jenny, motivated by her strong environmental and personal values, opts not to use air transportation as a means of travel, considering it unnecessary. However, this choice sets Jeny apart from societal norms, particularly in her workplace, where her colleagues view air travel as a usual way of life. Despite Jenny's attempts to explain her stance, she indicates that her colleagues often dismiss her decision, stigmatizing her as 'nuts' (Cherrier et al., 2012.) Jenny's social deviance results in her being excluded from work conferences and meetings as her colleagues, driven by differing values, fail to accept her perspective and do not view it as a valid excuse. Jenny indicated the difficulty of maintaining an environmentally conscious lifestyle due

to her need for social acceptance, which makes it nearly impossible to align her own values with the expectations of society. Moisander et al. (2002) emphasize that individuals with strong group ties frequently feel pressured to conform to societal norms, even when it means compromising their environmental values. Jenny's case illustrates environmentalists' struggles, who, despite their determination to live a lifestyle within planetary boundaries, may reluctantly abandon their efforts to 'live in peace' by adhering to societal norms (Cherrier et al., 2012.)

In our existing societal structure, diverging from established social norms is generally met with great resistance. Therefore, it is not feasible to call on consumers to significantly reduce their overall consumption levels to prevent environmental collapse. While reducing overall consumption is imperative for averting an ecological crisis, consumers face limitations in bringing about substantial change. Addressing the ecological crisis lies within comprehensive government intervention across various domains. Effective policies and regulations are crucial to address the consumption crisis in The United States.

*Reduced Advertising.* As mentioned in Chapter 2, our current marketing system provokes individuals to consume far beyond their needs by manipulating their psychology. As the marketing industry takes advantage of individuals' insecurities, firms are able to instill anxiety regarding a problem into the minds of consumers and present their product as a major solution to fix the perceived problem. A survey conducted in the '90s' revealed that nearly 90% of American CEOs believed it would be impossible to sell a new product without the use of advertising, and 85% of CEOs admitted that they often utilize advertising to persuade consumers to buy products they do not need, and 51% of consumers emphasized that advertising persuaded consumers to buy products that they did not actually want. The results of this study emphasize the manipulation of the advertising industry on an industrial scale, pushing consumers to increase

their consumption beyond their basic needs (Hickel, 2020.) Additionally, as noted in Chapter 3, greenwashing advertising techniques frequently capitalize off the privilege of consumers willing to pay premiums for eco-friendly products. As 70% of customers emphasize that they would be willing to pay premiums for goods from socially responsible companies, companies frequently use detective environmental marketing techniques to make their products appealing to environmentally friendly consumers (Foster et al., 2011.)

Reducing the influence of the marketing industry in The United States is crucial to curbing consumption levels, given the deceptive nature of advertising. A practical approach to achieve this can be demonstrated by implementing quotas to restrict the budget allocated for ad expenditures. By imposing limits on advertising spending, the number of ads showcased in the United States would decrease. Imposing quotas on total ad expenditure empowers consumers to make purchasing decisions based on their genuine needs rather than those demonstrated through deceptive advertising.  Reducing total ad expenditure would foster a more informed and conscientious consumer environment, working to reduce excess consumption levels.

To complement the reduction in advertising expenditures, implementing legislation against psychologically manipulative advertising tactics and deceptive environmental marketing claims would prove crucial in combatting misinformation in marketing. Drawing inspiration from existing frameworks such as the Trade Descriptions Act of 1968 in the United Kingdom, which imposes fines and potential incarceration for explicitly false advertising claims, the United States could establish a legal foundation to address misleading advertising (Petty, 1997.) Furthermore, drawing inspiration from recent legislative measures such as the French Climate Resilience Law scheduled for 2023 and the EU's proposed Unfair Commercial Practices Directive slated for 2025, the United States could introduce regulations addressing uncertified

sustainability labeling, environmental claims related to planned obsolescence, and the usage of terms like "carbon neutral" (Davis, 2023.) Emulating successful international frameworks off successful international frameworks offers a clear and efficient approach for the U.S. to combat deceptive environmental advertising, thereby contributing to a reduction in consumer spending.

*Circular Economy System.* Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 3, few corporations are genuinely dedicated to environmental and sustainability efforts despite the rise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the business world. Curt Weeden, an authority on social responsibility matters, underscores that there is often more rhetoric than substantive action when it comes to social responsibility, noting that companies frequently seek acknowledgment for actions that should be inherent to responsible business practices anyway (Foster et al., 2011.) Although many individuals emphasize the need for more CSR and ESG efforts as a means to alleviate the impact of consumption, perpetuating a system wherein "environmental efforts" serve merely as a strategy to increase profits would yield minimal effect in mitigating overall consumer consumption. A more impactful approach would involve transitioning towards a circular economy system, shifting the focus away from financial gains and towards environmental gains. In this paradigm, the emphasis lies on fostering ecological benefits rather than solely pursuing fiscal profits.

A circular economy system can be defined as an economic system striving for environmental neutrality. This innovative approach not only works to rectify environmental harm caused by resource acquisition but ensures as little damage is created through the production process of goods as possible (Haynes et al., 2015.) Central to the circular economy system is reducing material consumption, thoughtful redesign of products and services to decrease resource intensity, and creating durable goods intended for extended lifecycles  (EPA, 2023.) In

practice, the circular economy system seeks to minimize waste to an absolute minimum. As a product completes its lifecycle, a concerted effort is made to retain the materials within the economic system, facilitating large-scale recycling initiatives. This process enables repeated use of materials to generate additional value and curb unnecessary waste generation. While the current economic model in the United States follows a linear pattern of "take, make, consume, and throw away," a process heavily reliant on an abundance of disposable materials (European Parliament, 2023,) a transition to a more sustainable production and consumption model holds promise of substantially reducing the depletion of natural resources and mitigating environmental degradation.

Moreover, an integral aspect of the circular economy model involves dismantling the concept of planned obsolescence, which can be described as creating products that break down and require replacement after a relatively short period (Hickel, 2023, pg 209.) Conceived initially by lightbulb manufacturers to curtail the lifespan of their products and stimulate repetitive purchases, this strategy has been implemented primarily in the tech industry. Of the 13 billion smartphones sold between 2010 and 2019, less than 3 billion are still in use today, meaning 10 billion smartphones have been discarded in the last decade where they fill open-air dumps emitting mercury, arsenic, and various other toxic substances into the environment, as mentioned in Chapter 4 (Hickel, 2023, pg 210.)

To address these catastrophic environmental effects, the circular economy system advocates for integrating principles such as designing for durability, re-usability, and remanufacturing. As a part of this system, I propose implementing mandatory extended warranty policies on products, ensuring an increased lifecycle for all goods. It has been proven that the technology already exists to ensure appliances last two to five times longer than they currently

do with minimal additional costs (Hickel, 2023, pg 211.) With simple legislation such as mandating manufacturers to guarantee products for a maximum feasible lifespan and "right to repair laws" making it against the law to produce goods that ordinary users cannot fix, product lifecycles can go through the roof. Prioritizing refurbishment, repairments over repurchasing, and enforcing product designs that facilitate easy disassembly and manufacturing can further contribute to a sustainable circular economy. It is crucial to recognize that the current cycle of perpetual consumption has been established partly due to the declining quality of goods. Rather than advocating for a revolution, the solution lies within effective governance.

Additionally, the United States can also institute a circular economy system that leverages platforms like mobile apps and websites to encourage resource sharing among consumers, reducing the imperative for individual ownership. Hickel underscores the transformative potential of shifting from 'ownership' to 'usership,' emphasizing that sharing a single piece of equipment among ten households drastically reduces demand, diminishing overall consumption (Hickel, 2023, pg 217.) This initiative can be seamlessly integrated on a community-wide basis, fostering platforms where neighbors can collaboratively maintain shared equipment during its lifecycle. Projects like these can easily be upscaled by city governments, creating feasible, straightforward ways to promote reduced consumption and saving storage space and money in the process.

*Strong Legislation For Sustainable Consumption.* As mentioned in Chapter 4, the lack of support from our national government has made it nearly impossible for corporations to decrease expenses related to sustainable products. It is evident from the preceding chapters that there is a pressing need to significantly decrease the resource intensity of our daily lives, with sustainable consumption being crucial to achieving this goal. However, given the current lack of

affordability and accessibility to sustainability measures within the United States, it is unrealistic to expect citizens to increase their sustainable consumption and resource awareness. The United States government must take action by enacting legislation to promote sustainable accessibility. International efforts, such as the 10-year Framework of Programmes (10YFP) on sustainable consumption and production (SCP) and the global 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly goals 8 and 12, have laid the groundwork for a sustainable consumption agenda internationally. However, the limited presence of domestic legislation on sustainable consumption underscores the need for our local government to prioritize this agenda. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, it is acknowledged that sustainable consumption cannot rely solely on consumer actions. Government interventions such as providing effective corporate environmental subsidies and tax incentives aimed at lower costs and improving accessibility to sustainable goods are necessary to reduce consumer impact on our environmental systems.

Implementing subsidies or tax incentives is critical to fostering a more environmentally conscious society. These measures would work to collectively reduce consumers' environmental footprints by alleviating the financial burdens that often hinder the choice of green alternatives. A subsidy, defined as a sum of money granted by the government to assist an industry or business so that the price of a commodity may remain low (Oxford Dictionary, 2024), can be utilized to lower the prices of sustainable products. By providing businesses with the means to manufacture ethically sourced items at reduced costs, sustainable products can become accessible to all income levels, becoming the new standard.  As previously demonstrated, relying solely on consumer choices to drive sustainability is not enough when there are barriers to accessing eco-friendly options. Implementing government subsidies to keep sustainable goods

affordable is necessary to promote mindful consumption and reduce the use of environmentally harmful materials.

Additionally, tax incentives, designed to encourage specific economic activities by reducing tax payments required for that activity (Collins Dictionary, 2024), play a significant role in reducing consumers' environmental footprint. Businesses can be incentivized to produce sustainably sourced goods, install solar panels, reduce energy consumption, invest in green infrastructure, or obtain certifications like LEED or Energy Star. These initiatives have the potential to reduce consumer environmental footprints, promoting positive environmental outcomes significantly. Not only would a green tax incentive benefit consumers directly by lowering the impact of goods and services, but it would also work to raise consumer awareness, educating the public about the benefit of choosing environmentally friendly options, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section. Consumers who are informed about the benefits of sustainable shopping are more likely to seek out and support sustainable businesses and products. This, in turn, reduces the overall impact of consumer consumption on the environment.

Strong legislation for environmental subsidies and tax incentives is pivotal in establishing a foundation for long-term environmental sustainability. Amid a world focused on short-term gains, these policies offer clear economic benefits for businesses to invest in sustainability. By making sustainability financially attractive to businesses and accessible to consumers, governments can steer consumption patterns towards eco-friendly choices, thereby contributing to reduced environmental degradation. Legislation supporting sustainable consumption is a critical tool for achieving a sustainable future by making eco-friendly choices financially viable, promoting innovation, and addressing collective action challenges.

*Environmental Education Programs.* Finally, as previously emphasized, the urgency of addressing sustainability concerns has never been more crucial as the consequences of consumer overconsumption patterns become increasingly evident. This section underscores the necessity for enhanced sustainable consumption education initiatives within primary education school systems and university curricula. In a world facing increasing environmental challenges, educating our youth about the significance of mindful consumption is essential. By integrating sustainability principles into educational institutions' core curriculum, we can create a generation of environmentally aware students who understand the profound impacts their choices have on the future health of our environment. In order to effectively reduce consumer overconsumption, it is necessary to implement expanded environmental education programs nationwide that provide young students with the knowledge and skills necessary to become conscious consumers.

Due to the limits to growth concerns regarding increased consumption, it is necessary to administer early environmental education programs throughout the United States education system to make students aware of the ecological damage caused, motivating them to better understand and protect the environment from a young age. Research on environmental regulations has revealed a lack of knowledge among young consumers about the origin of many products. Thus, they are not able to trace products back to the natural resources from which they were derived. This lack of awareness prevents them from connecting products to their natural resources, hindering their ability to see themselves as consumers with an impact on the environment.

Moreover, the natural environment is often conceived as an object separate from humans. As a result, there is a significant awareness gap regarding the association between human

activities and their impact on the environment among youth (Hadjichambis, 2015.) Suppose a

clear link between shopping behavior and environmental health can be established at an early

age. In that case, young people will be able to realize a desire to help by making smarter personal

consumption choices and recycling and reusing products when possible (Hadjichambis, 2015.)

Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight the power of young people, both directly as consumers and

indirectly, by affecting their parents' choices. It is essential to include environmental education in

school curriculums for children beginning at a young age. Children are our future consumers,

professionals, and decision-makers; they are important catalysts for sustainable consumption

within their communities, and it is essential to recognize their role as agents of change through

interdisciplinary education.

In a study focusing on children's environmental representations and their intentions to

act, an Environmental Education Program (EEP) was implemented by the CYCERE

Environmental Center for Education on children aged 8-12 to capture the effectiveness of

teaching children environmental criteria. The program was a one-day experience with six

activities weaved into an investigation story-based scenario. Participants in the study were 286

children from five suburban elementary schools in Cyprus, Greece. This one-day program was

the first time these students had encountered issues related to consumerism and sustainability.

The participating children received six missing code, one code per activity in order to complete

the "secret diagram of the Green Cycle" (Hadjichambis, 2015.) Each of the six activities was

roughly 45 minutes long, with two short breaks throughout the activities administered.

For the first activity, children were asked to match different natural landscapes with the

raw materials and the products derived from them, aiming to develop the relationship between

the products the children consume and the natural environment. The second activity introduced

the first R (for reuse) by asking children to propose as many ways as possible to reuse an empty

glass jar. The third activity introduced the second R (for recycle) and entailed an amusing trash

game where the children were asked to separate trash piles according to their raw material while

learning about each material's recycling properties. The fourth activity introduced the third R

(for refuse) and was based on a selection process in which children had to choose between four

different cups composed of glass, plastic, metal, and paper, taking into consideration data related

to economic (cost and quantity), societal (convenience, personal use, practical aspects), and

environmental (raw material, reusability) aspects.

The fifth activity introduced the final R (for reduce), where children were asked to

choose between a homemade and a fast-food meal in order to compare the trash derived from the

two types of meals in order to realize that, in most cases, the fast-food meals produced much

more waste. After completing activities two through five, children were asked to balance the four

Rs criteria and rank them according to their priorities. This process was intended to enable the

children to put the criteria into hierarchical order: Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. During

the sixth and final activity, the children were given several raw materials and were asked to sort

them as renewable or non-renewable. In this exercise, the children were intended to realize that

consumers should use raw materials wisely and, whenever possible, try to conserve them. The

children obtained the "missing codes" through the six activities and completed the Green Cyle

(Hadjichambis, 2015.)

Despite the limitation of the program's short duration, it was revealed that it provided

children with more environmental criteria, allowing them to report their intentions to act as

sustainable consumers (Hadjichambis, 2015.) It appeared that the EEP enabled children to relate

decision-making criteria to recycling, waste minimization (refuse and reduce), and reusing, and

facilitated making the children more aware of the origin of the products they used. Most importantly, the EEP enabled the children to realize the conflicting interests between the criteria. Relating the children's environmental representations to their decision-making criteria, findings indicated a relationship between children's environmental representations and their intentions to act, as reflected through their decision-making process.

As the effects of the day-long program proved influential in how the students considered the natural environment, it is essential to consider the effects of implementing similar, long-term environmental education programs to elementary school curricula. Research has indicated a need for longer EEPs or repeated interventions over a more extended period to increase the possibility that the program effects will be sustained for children (Hadjichambis, 2015.) Implementing environmental activities such as the ones described in the study into elementary students' core curriculum would provide young children with behavioral intentions in terms of their willingness to act for the sustainability of the environment beginning at a young age.

Furthermore, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) emphasize the need for elementary school students to acquire an understanding of basic ecology, an awareness of the natural world, sensitivity to the need for protecting nature, and the acquisition of understanding and skills to help address environmental challenges (Kopina, 2020.) By integrating elements of ecological citizenship education into elementary education programs, students would be introduced to sustainable development. This approach frames sustainability in terms of the flexible use of natural resources and ecosystems for human benefit, while also emphasizing the limits to growth and the importance of sustaining all life on earth. Education has played and continues to play an essential role in the beliefs and lifestyles consumers choose to adopt.

Educational institutions must introduce cross-curricular teaching interventions designed to make students think critically and promote more environmentally aware patterns of consumption. An emphasis must be placed on the education system to build awareness of both global and local environmental issues and provide students with the appropriate information to act sustainably in regard to consumption. Educating the youth about how they can contribute to sustainability by promoting conscious consumerism is central to progress toward a more sustainable future, which can be achieved through increased Environmental Education programs in school systems.

In conclusion, the intricate relationship between consumer consumption and environmental degradation is multifaceted and deeply ingrained in societal structures. To mitigate the devastating impacts of climate change and curb environmental degradation, it is imperative to address consumer overconsumption as a fundamental driver of unsustainable resource depletion and ecological harm. This thesis has probed various dimensions of this complex issue, including an exploration of the psychological motivations for overconsumption, the pervasive influence of advertising, the evolution of sustainable business practices, and the challenges of equitable access to green alternatives. Given the systemic barriers discussed that limit access to sustainable options, it is evident that simply relying on individual consumer choices to mitigate environmental harm is insufficient. Therefore, the proposed policy recommendations offer a promising path forward. By addressing the root causes of overconsumption through legislation to curb advertising, transitioning to a circular economy model, enacting robust national policies for sustainable consumption, and integrating environmental education into curricula, societies can shift towards more sustainable consumption patterns. Ultimately, tackling consumer overconsumption requires a holistic approach that

combines regulatory measures with societal awareness and education, paving the way for a more environmentally responsible future.

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